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## ON ITALIAN AND SPANISH IN AMERICAN EDUCATION

A LETTER FROM MR. JUAN C. CEBRIÁN

Prof. Aurelio M. Espinosa, *Editor* HISPANIA, Stanford University,  
California.

Dear Editor:—Last week I read the article “Italian and Spanish in American Education” by Prof. Ernest H. Wilkins, University of Chicago, published last May in *The Bulletin of the New England Modern Language Association*. It is an earnest appeal for the study of Italian—in which a great number of scholars will agree; and an impassionate attack on the value of Spanish, in which every fair-minded student will notice, *prima facie*, onesidedness, unfairness, prejudice, possibly due to unacquaintance with the subject.

May I ask you for a few pages of HISPANIA to point out the fallacies of said article?

The attack is so virulent that some might think that the purpose of the article was only to discredit the study of Spanish and Spain in general, and that the Italian matter is brought in simply as a pretext to broach the main subject. Having taught Spanish for years, Mr. E. H. Wilkins asserts “to have both knowledge and love of the Spanish language and literature; and to have the happiest memories of Spain” (p. 16). That evidently conveys the impression of his sincerity and authority in the matter, thus adding more emphasis and weight to his article. But I beg to differ from those assertions: they require some qualifications. He may know the Spanish language and a little about Spanish literature, but he is unacquainted with Spanish history; he may have a little love for Spain and things Spanish, but he cannot love the real Spain, because he does not know her, or he has not caught her spirit. Therefore that knowledge and love that he predicates can not give any weight to his thesis. Let us examine the facts.

Mr. E. H. Wilkins justly points out the excellent qualities of the Italian language and of the Italian people, and very properly observes that their activities are unknown in the United States because “Italians, unlike the Germans, have never advertised their own intellectual achievements, and because our own inertia has

not penetrated the linguistic veil" (p. 16). In this he has made a discovery for the great majority of Americans; but he has failed to make another similar discovery of a fact as positive as the foregoing, to wit: that *Spaniards, unlike the Germans, unlike the French, have never advertised their own cultural achievements, and the inertia of the Americans has not penetrated the linguistic veil.* His discovery is a consequence of knowing Italian history: the failure in making the other discovery is a consequence of ignoring Spanish history. Mr. E. H. Wilkins flippantly dismisses this great subject with two lines: "no sane critic who knows the several European literatures would rank Spanish literature with Italian or with French in universal value" (p. 17). He does not offer any proof for this assertion; he simply dictates in the fashion of past centuries: *magister dixit.*

Mr. E. H. Wilkins' method of opposing the two countries is something like the judgment of an unlearned layman wishing to compare Michelangelo with Raphael, and detracting from this one in order to uphold Michelangelo, or vice versa detracting from the great sculptor to uphold Raphael. Professor Northup has already called attention to the futility of such comparisons, in the October HISPANIA, p. 205. Both were great, both geniuses, but different from each other: it is preposterous, as well as idle, to pretend to dictate who was the greater. So it is with the two great nations, Italy and Spain: both great, and different; both preponderant at different times and in different ways; both potent factors that have molded European culture and civilization through numerous centuries. Mr. E. H. Wilkins forgets those facts, or is unacquainted with them. He ignores that Spain's motto was PLUS ULTRA, *Más allá, Siempre adelante*, "Onward and onward." "Go ahead" (which is precisely the mainspring of progressive North Americans). And it was not a vain motto, not a braggadocio, not a bravado, not a routinary phrase in officialdom. It was a living thought! Because Spain went onward and ahead; She went *over there*, and over the top. Not over a narrow trench swept by the atrocious artillery invented by man, but over the great expanse of the *Mare Ignotum* swept by the stormy forces of Nature; once over there She did not stop, and went over an enormous, unknown continent swept by the storms of Nature and of savage man; and faithful to her motto, She went onward again over another unknown

and larger ocean, and for the first time She circumnavigated the Earth. She made a present to Europe of a new world—a continent and two oceans—two or three times as large as the old world. And She did it, and She went over there alone, without allies, or coöperation of other countries: and thus the whole human race became indebted to Her.

It is quite natural for a mind "bound by the walls of his own class room," or even "dreaming a little therein" (p. 14), to ignore facts as large as two thirds of our globe; but the broad-minded man, the thoughtful student, the fair-minded philosopher cannot ignore facts of that size, and knowing that no effect can be produced without a cause, cheerfully admits that the enormous, the immense, the overshadowing events above mentioned were produced by an equally enormous, immense, overshadowing cause, or series of causes, none other than Spain, Spanish ideas and ideals, Spanish blood and money (red and gold), Spanish knowledge, science and culture, Spanish pluck, persistence, efficiency.

I will not say that the flippant dismissal of such overpowering facts and truths as non-existent is akin to insanity: I will only ask to what else is it akin?

If the average American student admits, as Mr. E. H. Wilkins asserts, that "we are and always have been limited in view to the things of our time, our own place, our own concern" (p. 15), and tries to broaden his views by turning his candid, unprejudiced mind to Europe, he cannot fail to see that Spain was not only a prominent co-laborer to European history, like Italy and other great countries, but She was besides preëminent in respect to his own place, to his own continent, to his beloved America. And naturally, logically, and in consequence he will feel inclined to get acquainted with that powerful, immense, sublime force that, among other achievements, brought to light the very ground on which we tread, and its marvelous three times secular history: we must not forget that, quoting Charles F. Lummis, "the Spanish pioneering of the Americas was the largest, the longest and most marvelous feat of mankind in all history." (Spanish Pioneers, 7th edition, p. 12.) And naturally he will feel inclined to dig in and fathom by his own work the marvelous literature of that country, that remains yet unknown to him.

Any fair-minded American thinker will feel gratified that a

large majority of the 200,000 students of Spanish in our day are alive to these patent facts in relation to Spain, and certainly will not begrudge the vital interest in the language that will gradually promote our friendly intercourse with the growing Hispanic world of one hundred million people. Any fair-minded American thinker will highly approve of giving greater importance in our educational system to the Italian language and culture; but will firmly reprove the sordid method of recruiting its adepts by stealing them away from other honest pursuits, especially from the study of the country which rightfully has claims to the deepest interest of the American citizen.

Mr. E. H. Wilkins wants to prop his plan by the assent of other professors, and produces fifteen anonymous opinions of three professors of French, four professors of English, and other pedagogues. But he does not inform us whether they "are bound by the walls of their classrooms" (or perhaps swayed by the breezes of political currents). We know that even university professors may be found who are unacquainted with some historical facts.\*

He also copies a few words from some European government reports, which to the uninitiated might mean disparaging remarks about Spain; not so to the initiated. In this Mr. E. H. Wilkins shows again his limited knowledge of European history and of the psychology of nations; he fails to understand the utter dissimilarity between the relations—political, economic, historical—of England or France with Italy and Spain, and the same kind of relations of the United States with the two peninsular countries and Spanish America.

I do not propose to compare the literatures of France, Italy, and Spain, and find their respective levels; it would require volumes, and it would be the idle repetition of the Michelangelo and Raphael dispute. My purpose is to show the absurdity of Mr. E. H. Wilkins'

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\*In justice to some of those opinions let me say that some of them specifically agree with the Chicago professor in his Italian contention, refraining, however, from mentioning the Spanish language. But in all this matter the fact that stares us in the face is the very skillful way in which Mr. E. H. Wilkins succeeded in failing to solicit and print the really weighty opinions of many American professors and scholars who believe exactly the opposite. American trained scholars love the truth, and the flippant and groundless assertions of Mr. E. H. Wilkins will not influence them in the least.

proposal, and to call the attention of teachers of Spanish to the unfair attack against the learning of Spanish in the United States; that they may honorably resent it, and may take proper steps to stop it. We do not want to retaliate; that would be as unfair as the method we deprecate. We want every language to stand on its own merits before the American public; and I earnestly urge our teachers of Spanish to stand by the substantial merits of their chosen profession, and endeavor to uphold before their pupils and the public in general the rightful claims of Spanish, the linguistic, literary, cultural, historical, political, and commercial advantages of the Spanish language to the thoughtful American citizen.

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SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA  
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